

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019

www.ijellh.com

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The Politics of Patriarchy: A Re-reading of Daphne Du Maurier's Rebecca

Abstract: The mindset of patriarchy has withstood the test of time. It is an indomitable force that corrupts the minds of people, abuses their powers, and exerts their superiority over others. This paper is an endeavour to analyse how patriarchy works in establishing the feminine identity of the protagonist in Daphne du Maurier's modern classic – Rebecca, and how it inextricably connects the main characters to villainy. The paper also attempts to articulate the true meaning of “patriarchy” and how the term cannot be linked to any particular gender exclusively.

Keywords: Patriarchy, traditions, norms, gender, identity, femininity, sexuality

Inequality between men and women has always been an issue in our society. Women were always taught and expected to be committed to their husbands and be devoted to them throughout their life. It was considered to be a privilege of a woman to serve her husband or male dominant. This is the main thought that is the foundation of a patriarchal society. Women were denied education, and even if they were educated, it was with the ultimate motive to groom her to be a perfect wife and mother. The novel Rebecca essentially tries to portray a woman's attempt to accept and defend the patriarchal order to sustain her social position and a

man's struggle to protect the same. Right from the beginning of the novel to its end, we see the characters, especially women, overshadowed by the haunting presence of the estate of Manderley, which is a symbolic representation of the patriarchal society. It also showcases how a woman has to suffer and sacrifice in order to live under a tyrant custom of patriarchy. The element of patriarchy is submerged between the layers of a carefully woven story of great suspense and twists in the novel.

"She's got the three things that matter in a wife," says Maximilian de Winter's grandmother about Rebecca, "breeding, brains, and beauty". These were the qualities that defined an ideal woman in a patriarchal society. And these were the qualities Rebecca possessed and the protagonist of the novel pined for. The story starts with the unnamed narrator dreaming about revisiting their estate – Manderley. Presently, both Mr. and Mrs. De Winter are in a hotel, possibly living in exile. We can see that every small thing or news entangles them in an unstoppable train of haunting memories of Manderley. From there, the story goes into a flashback where the narrator recalls the simpler times of her life. It was in Monte Carlo, while the narrator was working as a "companion" for a wealthy American Mrs. Van Hopper – a snobbish, loud lady, when she met Mr. Max de Winter, the owner of the magnificent estate of Manderley. Mr. de Winter and the narrator get acquainted and at the time of her departure, he proposes to her. "Instead of being companion to Mrs. Van Hopper you become mine, and your duties will be almost exactly the same" – this cold and patronizing manner of his proposal raises the question whether their marriage is based on love or on his need for a caretaker to his Manderley. It is an expression of how femininity is regulated and expressed by male dominants through class difference. However, the actual action starts after the marriage of the narrator and Maxim, unlike what traditionally constitutes the happy ending of a romantic narrative. After the marriage, the couple then retreat to his ancestral estate of Manderley.

From here, the narrator is referred to as Mrs. de Winter. Earlier Maxim remarks about how unusual her name was, and she assents it by saying that it was just like her father's name. This points to the dependence of women on men for their identity, be it their father or husband. The newly acquired name of the narrator suggests that she is no one but Mr. de Winter's wife. But unfortunately, Manderley is bathed in the shadow of the former Mrs. De Winter, Rebecca, who was drowned in the ocean near the estate, over a year ago. The element of patriarchy is represented in the unspoken traditions and conventions performed every day in Manderley, whether it be the ritual of bringing tea or the routine of the mistress being in the morning room. Manderley continues to run according to the instructions of Rebecca, who is no longer alive. The pressure of adjusting to a whole new life and keeping up to the standards of the former mistress of the mansion is tightened when Rebecca's devoted housekeeper Mrs. Danvers, starts taunting Mrs. de Winter. Mrs. Danvers is portrayed as a sinister lady, who had a maternal affection for Rebecca, thus obviously was repulsed by the narrator who took the position of Rebecca. Always draped in black, it reflected her character. She never left an opportunity to torture Mrs. De Winter by haunting her with the memories of Rebecca. She is one of the most remembered characters of the novel.

The days ahead in Manderley were no less than hell for the narrator. Though she had support and encouragement from Maxim's sister Beatrice and his assistant Frank Crawley, Mrs. de Winter was apprehensive about the fact that she could never take the place of Rebecca in Manderley nor in Maxim's heart. Manipulated by Mrs. Danvers, the narrator dresses up as their ancestor Caroline de Winter in the traditional costume ball at Manderley, unaware of the fact that it was the same outfit Rebecca had worn the previous year. The ball ends in disaster, where Maxim is horrified at this sight and the narrator's worst fear being confirmed that Maxim would never love her. Even though so much happened, they put up a show for the public, being the perfect host and hostess. This reflects the attitude of upper-class women that whatever

problems they may have; they always wear a mask of perfection to maintain their social status. Mrs. de Winter musters the courage to confront Mrs. Danvers, but Mrs. Danvers almost convinces the narrator to commit suicide by speaking about her insignificant presence. The thought of giving up her own life shows how frustrated and depressed Mrs. de Winter was, with her constant efforts to fit into a society which she didn't belong to. Quite ironical, the more she gets obsessed by Rebecca, the more ghostlier Mrs. de Winter becomes. The story takes a drastic turn when their conversation gets interrupted by the rockets set out by a ship that has run aground in the cove. The narrator is broken from Mrs. Danvers' spell and goes to the cove to see what happened. The diver who went to inspect the ship discovers the wrecked boat of Rebecca under water, with her body locked inside the cabin. This incident prompts Maxim to confess the horrendous truth to the narrator that Rebecca's death was not a mere accident after all, but it was a heinous murder done by Maxim himself.

Maxim is unrepentant in his murder of Rebecca. Maxim justifies his action by demonizing Rebecca and blames her for being a malevolent woman who lived an immoral life, unknown to the world. She had multiple affairs, including a relationship with her cousin Jack Favell. Maxim recalls his thoughts when Rebecca revealed about her true feelings a couple of days after their marriage, "I did not kill her, I watched her, I said nothing, I let her laugh...she knew I would never stand in a divorce court and give her away, have fingers pointing at us, mud flung at us in the newspapers...". When Rebecca began to let loose the guard of her secret life, Maxim, in fear of society knowing their truth, decided to threaten her and went to her sailboat. There, she claimed that she was pregnant with Favell's child and she would make the child the heir of Manderley and no one would ever question her. In an uncontrollable fury, Maxim shot Rebecca and locked her body in the cabin, sailed the boat out to the harbour, drilled the holes at the bottom and sank it.

Maxim's desire to murder Rebecca was motivated by the acute need to protect the patriarchal system. "I thought about Manderley too much. I put Manderley first, before anything else", says Maxim, expressing his ardent love and dedication towards Manderley. Manderley represents the austerity of the age-old patriarchal rules and traditions. It is the source of all the conflicts in the novel. Maxim was willing to lead a life of artifice rather than go through a divorce with Rebecca. Maxim says, "I accepted everything – because of Manderley. What she did in London did not touch me – because it did not hurt Manderley". He ultimately chose murder to divorce to protect his precious estate. Maxim and Manderley are to be considered as one – his status is only as Manderley's Master, indicating to the conventional patriarchal connotations of the male's virtues and privileges of autonomy, domination, self-possession.

Though the murder of one's wife is an unpardonable crime, it also reveals a different shade of Maxim's character, i.e., a sense of insecurity and failure. After confession, the protagonist takes full control of Maxim. He is infantilized. His incapability to manage and control his estate, people, and his own wife, was a flaw that was unacceptable to a society which demanded an ideal model of masculinity. His acts of villainy might have been an attempt to enshroud these flaws and to protect his image of an 'ideal patriarch'. Both his wives yielded to the traditional male position of domination by gaining complete control over him. When ultimately Maxim tells the truth to Mrs. de Winter, we see a role-reversal of Maxim and the narrator. Maxim had become a child, seeking comfort from the narrator, who has become more mature and confident.

This role-reversal also reveals another shade of Mrs. de Winter's character. Apart from the docile nature, the narrator has become a selfish person, who, for her own benefits, supports the crimes of a patriarch (Maxim). The revelations of Maxim gave her the assurance that she was supported by a man of powerful position and it restored her identity as the mistress of

Manderley, giving the confidence to exercise her new-found power over others. It was her own self-consciousness, inexperience, and ignorance that had made the narrator alienated from the upper-class. She thought of Rebecca as her greatest rival, who was not even alive to be a physical competition. The trepidation to reach up to the standards of Rebecca and possess her qualities gave manure to Mrs. de Winter's obsession to such an extent that the only thing that mattered to her was not the fact that her husband was a murderer, but the ultimate feeling of triumph over Rebecca. The narrator is rewarded with the identity of Mrs. de Winter, the security of belonging to the male, but only at the cost of underwriting his definitions of what femininity should be.

Rebecca was considered as profligate, rebellious, and untameable by Maxim, which were the qualities that were inadmissible in an upper-class woman. She was murdered because Rebecca was, in a way, challenging the patriarchal rules by her lifestyle. Rebecca's palpable presence haunts nearly every scene of the novel. The conflict between a past which threatens to destroy the present and a present which tries to strike out the past is faced by almost all the characters in the novel. Exploration of Rebecca's sexuality is turned into a story of crime and murder, which is an attempt to shroud the tabooed expression of femininity and the sexual preferences of women. Rebecca is an aristocratic mix of independent and essential femininity. She has a strong physical presence, a confident and alluring sexuality. Heterosexuality is represented in the novel as a construct and not as a natural given, giving no space for any other form of sexual preferences to exist. She jeopardizes the social categories by existing outside them. Michelle Masse speaks in an article that Gothic romance persuades readers to accept the situation of "normal" gender relationships by depicting heroine's psychological development into a masochist who assigns subjectivity to another. In the article, "Returning to Manderley: Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class", the author Alison Light speaks about the nature of stereotyping romantic narratives as those in which the readers are invited to identify with

the passive heroine who only finds true happiness in submitting to a masterful male. This kind of romance emerges as a form of oppressive ideology which works to keep women in their socially and sexually subordinate place.

From here, the plot turns to a struggle between people who try to protect Maxim's image as an ideal figure, and those who try to expose him. By manipulating the facts about the holes drilled at the bottom of the boat, the court declares Rebecca's death as a suicide. Rebecca's cousin Favell and Mrs. Danvers had a vague idea of the truth that Maxim was behind the death of Rebecca. To investigate further on the case, Maxim and Mrs. de Winter, along with the local magistrate Colonel Julyan and Favell set out to London to visit Dr. Baker, whom Rebecca had visited on the day of her death. From Dr. Baker they come to know that Rebecca was not pregnant, as she was infertile. And, she was dying of cancer. The illness was considered as a motive for her suicide by the magistrate and Maxim was yet again saved. At last off with their burden, both Mr. and Mrs. de Winter sets off to Manderley. During their stop along the way, Maxim learns that Mrs. Danvers has disappeared. Sensing something amiss, they rush their journey to Manderley, only to find the estate in flames. It is assumed that the act was initiated by Mrs. Danvers herself, in her pure vengeance against the murderer of Rebecca.

The ending of the novel reminds us of its beginning – the nostalgia of the narrator about Manderley. It was Manderley alone that assured Maxim's position in the society. With the destruction of the estate, he has become an unknown, ghostly figure, quite insignificant to the world. Both Mr. and Mrs. de Winter do not feel liberated from an ostentatious society but they rather feel dislocated. There is a feeling to return to the familiar world of social security. The novel is set in a period of social changes. The apprehension of the protagonist can be seen as an anxiety of the inevitable change that would come.

Conclusion

The destruction of Manderley is symbolic of the downfall of the patriarchal system. Lives of women had undergone profound changes in 20th century. Women were gaining recognition and their status was changing from passive citizens to active ones. With the concept of feminism, women started to demand equality to men and also the end of male domination, signalling the fall of the patriarchal system. Women's liberation movement, which was an attempt to redefine the social position of women, had brought about a change in the ideas about their identity in society. An undercurrent of a great, inevitable change (the empowerment of women) that will shake the very foundation of the patriarchal rules and traditions is mirrored in the collapse of the great estate of Manderley in the novel. The paper looks into the intricacies of patriarchal system and how it abuses its powers to maintain the social supremacy. Unlike in other novels, all the characters in *Rebecca*, at one time or the other advocates for patriarchal society, and even commits vicious acts to protect their social positions. The romantic hero turns into a masochist and the narrator loses her innocence to attain the position of power in the patriarchal world. Both fiends and angels exist and good and evil are very real in the novel. Heta Pyrhonen in her article "Bluebeard's Accomplice: "Rebecca" as a Masochistic Fantasy" speaks about Anne Williams who explained in a Bluebeard Gothic approach that the dead woman represents "Patriarchy's secret, founding 'truth' about the female: woman as mortal, expendable matter/mater", which justifies the drama unfolding in the novel *Rebecca* as well.

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